

FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: April 14, 2016

Agenda Item: Handkerchief Lake Harvest Limit Waiver

Division: Fisheries

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 5 Min

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Background. Westslope cutthroat trout have been reduced to less than 10% of their historic range in Montana. The South Fork Flathead River Drainage comprises approximately half of the remaining genetically pure, interconnected populations of westslope cutthroat and provides a world class fishery resource. Persistence of this native trout fishery is threatened by non-native rainbow and Yellowstone cutthroat trout historically introduced into 21 mountain lakes in the drainage that are moving downstream and hybridizing with westslope cutthroat. The South Fork Flathead Cutthroat Conservation Project has been systematically removing non-native fish and replacing them with pure westslope cutthroat. The project to date has successfully chemically treated 13 lakes and 6 more lakes are being genetically swamped. Handkerchief Lake is scheduled for treatment in September, 2016. Handkerchief Lake is a 51.3 acre located in the Flathead National Forest in the Hungry Horse District and is a popular trout and grayling fishery. Anglers have asked for limit waivers prior to previous treatments to allow more harvest of fish. Current bag limit is 3 trout and/or grayling per day.

Public Involvement Process & Results: Limit waivers were discussed in the South Fork Flathead Project annual public meetings in the past, and at the Flathead Wildlife public meeting held on March 10, 2016. The only comments received on previous programmatic regulation changes concerned how soon anglers could take advantage of waived limits.

Alternatives and Analysis:

No Action: Taking no action somewhat lessens local enforcement challenges because there would be no need to determine that people with large numbers of fish in their possession caught them from Handkerchief Lake. However, anglers would not be able to harvest as many fish as otherwise possible prior to treatment that would soon be killed anyway. The limit waiver also helps build public support for the program which has long-term benefits for everyone.

Waive Daily Limits on Handkerchief Lake: This alternative would meet anglers' desires for the opportunity to harvest more fish that are destined to be killed anyway. There have been no known problems with previous limit waivers. Waiving the limit at Handkerchief Lake would potentially make enforcing limits at other nearby lakes more complicated for enforcement personnel. This potential complication has not proved to be a problem in our experience with previous waivers.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale Region 1 recommends temporarily waiving limits on Handkerchief Lake to build public support for the project and to answer anglers' desires to not waste fish.

Proposed Motion:

I move that the Combined Trout daily and possession bag limits for Handkerchief Lake be removed effective immediately through August 31, 2016.